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Rehabilitation of the mother tongue in teaching EFL to adult learners

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Abstract

As the most widely-spread foreign language currently taught in the world, English has been compared and contrasted to almost all mother tongues in order to improve the outcome of the teaching/ learning process. As a highly inflected language, Romanian differs from the almost analytical English in several respects that pose problems to the Romanian learner through their apparent simplicity and straightforwardness. The author has collected samples of current mistakes that intermediate Romanian learners make both in Romanian and in English: (i) they are not aware of certain subtleties in their mother tongue (like permission asking, granting obligation, necessity, probability or usage of verbal tenses etc); (ii) synonymy in Romanian; (iii) word-formation in both languages; (iv) they are confused regarding current ranks and titles in both cultures etc. In an experimental group of 60 intermediate students who study English as a major subject, the author made a two-sided experiment: she made sure that the students were familiar with the concept of modality in their mother tongue before passing on to teaching and explaining it in English. It was a successful idea as the students became aware of the concept of politeness and modality in Romanian and learned English modality more quickly and accurately.

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1. Introduction

All languages and cultures have specific means to show politeness, deference, respect, or recognition of the social status of the speaker versus the hearer or the reverse. There are multiple ways in which a speaker of a given language or culture shows politeness: the lexicon (for example, employing

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certain words in formal occasions, and colloquial forms in informal contexts), the morphology (for example, using special verb forms for polite discourse), body language, intonation etc.

Politeness theory is the theory that accounts for the redressing of the affronts to face posed by face-threatening acts to addressees. First formulated in 1978 by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, politeness theory has since expanded academia's perception of politeness. Politeness is the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another (Mills, 2003: 6). Another definition is "a battery of social skills whose goal is to ensure everyone feels affirmed in a social interaction". In other words, being polite therefore consists in attempting to save face for your interlocutor(s).

2. Experiment

In an ample paper entitled *Politeness strategies among native and Romanian speakers of English*, Dominic Ambrose reports on an experiment on 70 English natives and 70 highly proficient non-native English speakers. The experiment was carried out in 1994 in Romania. The main target of the experiment was to see how strategies of politeness work in different cultures and to what extent they are transposed into another culture when the native speaker uses that other foreign language, here English. The administered questionnaires referred to hypothetical social situations that were likely to be familiar to both groups of questionees. They were asked to write down their likely utterances in the respective contexts.

The author of this paper presumes that a good knowledge and awareness of the politeness strategies in one's mother tongue (which will be called source language) are usually transferred into the target language (whether they are acceptable or not in that language) and can be identified quite easily. The question is to what extent the politeness strategies used in the source language are transferable into or are good enough in the target language.

Our experiment was carried out in Romania, University of Craiova, Faculty of Letters. The students reading English in this faculty are of various extractions, i.e. native Romanian speakers (about 94%), native Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians (about 4.50%) and others (about 1.50%). Only Romanian and Moldavian students (whose native tongue is also Romanian) were included in the experiment.

In order to avoid unwanted interferences and because the number of non-native students of English are not statistically significant, Bulgarians, Serbs, Macedonians and others (i.e. 6%) were left out.

The author explained to the students that an experiment was being carried out and were told what was expected to do, but they were not given detailed explanations on the target in view. They were further told about the questionnaire they would be asked to answer, that the testing was anonymous and they were asked not to cheat in any way.

The participants in the experiment were 60 first and second-year students aged between 19 and 23.

For a stricter control of the results, the questionnaires were administrated when the students gathered for one of the lecture courses of English grammar. The test proper lasted 30 minutes (a total of 50 minutes if we add the administration time: handing out the questionnaires, answering questions etc.).

2.1. Pre-assumptions of the experiment:

- (i) all the questionees are good speakers of Romanian, as they are native speakers;
- (ii) their knowledge of English is about the same: intermediate to upper intermediate;
- (iii) presumably there were no external interferences.

2.2. Hypothesis

In the absence of native speakers of English, our hypothesis was restricted to seeing how strategies of politeness work in different cultures and to what extent they are transposed into another culture when the native speaker uses that culture's language.

2.3. *Questionnaire and selection criteria*

(i) It consisted in a brief description of certain situations that require the participant to ask for permission, to grant permission, to deny permission, to ask for a favor, to deny a favor, to refuse, etc.

(ii) The questionnaire included 20 questions, but we selected and analysed the answers to the most relevant ten that permitted drawing reliable conclusions regarding the most frequently used means of expressing politeness in the two languages. The author selected the ten situations to be further processed according to the following criteria:

- to cover as many different situations as possible;
- clearest description of the situation in the mother tongue;
- item formulation that enabled the shortest answers on the part of the questionees;

(iii) The students were advised to use short answers, of no more than 15 to 20 words;

Out of the 60 questionnaires that were returned to the administrator of the test ten were not included in the statistics because, for various reasons, they were only partially filled out and did not allow the application of the criteria under (ii).

2.4. *Data processing*

As we have stated before, after analyzing all the answers for both Romanian and English tests, we chose only ten of them which are relevant for the usage of politeness strategies in the two languages. These ten questions (no.1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 13, 14, 17 and 19) describe the following situations: asking for a favour, refusing politely, excusing oneself for an unpleasant situation, talking on the phone, making a suggestion, calling for help.

2.4.1. *Data processing for the questionnaire in Romanian*

As stated before only the most relevant ten situations described in the questionnaire were processed, the remaining ones being left out as we considered them irrelevant. We were interested in the way the students use specific words such as “vă rog” and “please” and the modal verbs appropriate to the situation described in the questionnaire. According to the criteria, the answers that included either an adequate modal or “va rog” in Romanian and an adequate modal or “please, in English, respectively, were considered correct/as satisfying the requirements of politeness strategy. In Romanian culture there is an extra element that needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the level of politeness between two speakers that communicate on a formal basis, i.e. the use of the second person plural/of politeness as a form of address and the polite pronoun *dumneavoastră* instead of *tu*. The mere use of the polite pronoun already confers a certain degree of politeness in Romanian and the constant use of the other elements expressing politeness are desirable but not always strictly necessary. The following tables present the answers to the questions no. 1 and 2, respectively. The situation described in Romanian is ambiguous as far as the relations between the two persons is concerned, therefore all the answers below are acceptable, i.e. the singular form of address is associate with *te rog* and the polite form of address with a modal verb (*puteți*).

Table 1: Answers to question 1 from the Romanian test

Situation	Answers	Percentage
Cereți unei persoane să va dea o carte care se află pe o masă lângă ea.	Vă rog frumos, puteți să îmi dați cartea?	35%
	Te rog frumos, poți să îmi dai cartea?	30%
	Dă-mi, te rog, cartea.	10%
	Other	25%

The first table shows that the native Romanian students prefer to use ‘polite’ words such as *te rog* (‘please’) instead of the proper forms of the so-called “semi-auxiliary modal verbs” (Carioteanu, 1956). Notice that the 2nd person, singular and plural, are used almost equally. ●

Table 2: Answers to question 2 from the Romanian test

Situation	Answers	Percentage
Întrebați un polițist cum puteți să găsiți o anumită stradă.	Nu vă supărați, puteți să îmi spuneți unde este strada ?	60%
	Puteți să îmi spuneți unde e strada ?	20%
	Other	20%

It is relevant from the second table that Romanian students prefer to use a ‘frozen’ expression (*nu vă supărați*) instead of the proper form (mood, person, tense) of the verb *a putea* (*can*). Moreover, our speaker instinctively uses only the polite pronoun as his relations with the policeman are presumably formal.

2.4.1.1. Conclusions for the test in Romanian

One of the most obvious conclusions is that the students do not use properly their own mother tongue as far as the strategies of politeness are concerned, i.e.

- they have the tendency of using some specific words such as *te rog* (*va rog*) (‘please’ in English) instead of using the appropriate forms of the verbs;
- the students use the present tense of the indicative mood (*pot sa...?*) instead of the present conditional which is more polite when asking for permission (*as putea sa ...?*).
- in our opinion, the percentage of 20 to 25% of inadequate answers is too high when native speakers are considered

Some reasons for the limited performance of the Romanian users in English regarding the strategies of politeness and face-saving were due to the fact that:

- their apparently very limited knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon politeness strategies
- weak communication abilities in both languages
- insufficient language practice of everyday English in a genuine English cultural context

2.4.2.. Data processing for the questionnaire in English

As in the case of the test in Romanian, we are going to present only two tables, for questions no.1 and 2 because of the limited space. The morphological characteristic of Modern English, i.e. of employing one and the same personal pronoun for the second person singular, plural and of politeness (you) requires other linguistic abilities on the part of the speaker so that the strategies of politeness should be observed. According to Halliday (2004), *please* is almost compulsory in English, unless the speaker is able to come up with a very sophisticated formulation of a polite request, refusal etc. that makes *please* superfluous. For situation 1 the statistics is apparently different, but we remind you that pronoun use in Romanian is very important. However, as the description of situation 1 was intentionally ambiguously formulated, all the answers are acceptable Tables 1 and 3). For situation 2 (tables 2 and 4), *inadequate*, *adequate*, *good* and *very good* answers are more or less in the same proportion in both languages.

Table 3: Answers to question 1 from the English test

Situation	Answers	Percentage
Ask a person to give you a book that is on the table near him/her.	Excuse me, can/could you give me the book, please?	60%
	Would you mind giving me the book?	20%
	Other	20%

Table 4: Answers to question 2 from the English test

Situation	Answers	Percentage
Ask a bobby how you can find a street.	Nu vă supărați, puteți să îmi spuneți unde este strada?	60%
	Puteți să îmi spuneți unde e strada?	20%
	Other	20%

2.5. General conclusions

We believe that the relatively similar ratios obtained for both languages (situations 1 and 2) are more than coincidental. They reflect the standards of the mother tongue (= Romanian) in English and the English culture. We notice that most of the answers are very polite due to the expression *excuse me*. The modal verb *can* is also properly used, it is right, but the variety of polite means employed is scarce in English. The Romanian polite pronoun must be replaced by other means of expressing politeness in English, i.e. a variety of modal verbs, morphological means, please etc. It is obvious that the Romanian native learners are insufficiently familiarized with the cultural habits of politeness in English and their knowledge of modal verbs in English is poor.

A piece of observation from our teaching experience is that non-native learners of English in general, and those in whose languages there are distinct pronominal forms for polite/formal vs. informal address feel free of any linguistic constraints in English because of the single form of address, *you*. Young learners in particular interpret this purely linguistic simplification as a simplification of the human interrelations as well, which is obviously neither true nor acceptable.

The author takes the liberty of making some suggestions that might contribute to the improvement of communication abilities and particularly of the strategies of politeness of non-native speakers of English:

- apart from the bettering of the level of English knowledge,
- the teachers should make sure that their students are familiarized with the use of face-saving expressions and modal verbs in their own language and only then teach these notions in English.
- we also believe that a foreign language, any foreign language, should be taught on a culturally – based foundation of the foreign tongue. What is valid or enough in one culture may be neither valid nor enough in another, but the comparative standard is ALWAYS set by the mother tongue.

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4. Appendix

A.1. English test

1. On a table there is a book you need. Ask the young lady sitting at the table to give it to you.
2. Ask a bobby where the Princess' Street is.
3. You are asked for a loan of money. Refuse your friend without hurting him.
4. Tell someone who is driving the car you are in to roll up the window because you are cold.
5. You are late for class. Apologize to the teacher.
6. You are invited in the office of the manager who has a guest. As you want to talk to him in private, apologize for having changed your mind.
7. Ask for help to move the piano.
8. You dial a number. Ask to talk to the man's sister.
9. Ask your sister to mail a letter for you.
10. Tell John it is 5 pm, the hour he asked you to wake him up.
11. Ask permission to borrow a ball-point pen from a person you have not met before.
12. You work as a travel agency. Invite your client to sign the contract.
13. Suggest your colleagues another meeting to talk over the project again.
14. Refuse a date, but do not hurt the person asking for it.
15. Suggest your parents' old friend to give up smoking.
16. You have been kidnapped. You are imploring your kidnapper to set you free.
17. You are in desperate situation. Call for help very insistently.
18. Draw someone's attention that smoking in the restaurant is forbidden.
19. You are at the same restaurant and you are ordering a pizza.
20. Invite two of your best friends to your birthday party.

A.2. Romanian test

1. Pe masă e o carte care vă trebuie. Rugați-o pe tânăra care șade la masă să vi-o dea.
2. Întrebați un polițist de la circulație unde se află Strada Florilor.
3. Vi se cere un împrumut. Refuzați-vă prietenul fără să-l jigniți.
4. Spuneți-i celui care conduce mașina să dea geamul sus că vă e frig.
5. Ați întârziat la ore. Cereți-vă scuze profesorului.
6. Sunteți invitat în biroul directorului la care se află un musafir. D-voastră doriți o discuție între patru ochi cu directorul și vă scuzați că v-ați răzgândit.
7. Solicitați ajutor ca să mutați pianul.
8. Formați un număr la telefon. Cereți să vorbiți cu sora domnului care a răspuns la telefon.
9. Rugați-o pe sora D-voastră să vă pună o scrisoare la poștă.
10. Colegul de cameră v-a rugat să-l treziți la ora cinci. Treziți-l.
11. Rugați o persoană necunoscută să vă împrumute un pix.
12. Sunteți la o agenție de turism. Invitați clientul să semneze contractul.
13. Propuneți-le colegilor încă o întâlnire pentru a finaliza proiectul.
14. Refuzați întâlnirea propusă, dar nu-l jigniți pe cel care v-a făcut-o.
15. Sugerați-i unui prieten mai în vârstă al părinților să se lase de fumat.
16. Ați fost răpit(ă). Implorați-l pe răpitor să vă elibereze.
17. Sunteți într-o situație disperată. Solicitați cu insistență ajutor.
18. Atrageți atenția unei persoane că nu se fumează în restaurant.
19. Sunteți la același restaurant și comandați o pizza.
20. Invitați doi prieteni buni la ziua D-voastră de naștere.